

BUYING HELP

INTRODUCTION

If you don't know what type of product you need, or you're wondering whether or not a particular product will work with your computer, contact *Buying Help*.

If you want to buy a new desktop or notebook computer, please provide details of how much you want to spend and the type of tasks you want your new PC to perform.

If you're looking to buy an upgrade for your computer, you need to include as much information about your current system as possible. Knowing your computer make and model, processor, amount of memory and motherboard model can help us to provide a more accurate advice.

Chris Finnamore

Our Labs Manager can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.

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Struggling to get HD DVD

Q I have an Acer Aspire 9920 laptop, which I want to plug into my LCD TV to play high-definition films using its HD DVD drive.

The back of my TV has SCART, component, S-video, HDMI and VGA (PC) inputs. What cables do I need to make the connection?

John Moody

A There are a couple of ways to connect your laptop to your TV, as the Aspire has both VGA and DVI outputs. You can either use a VGA cable to connect the laptop's VGA port to the TV's VGA input, or run a DVI-to-HDMI cable from the laptop's DVI output to the TV's HDMI input. Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages.

In theory, DVI provides superior image quality to analogue VGA, as the laptop doesn't have to convert the digital video signal to analogue only for the LCD TV to convert it back to digital. However, many LCD TVs will not display their native resolution when plugged into a laptop via HDMI, and will instead scale the image to standard HD resolutions such as 720p or 1080i. This isn't a problem for video, but it makes text look awful, so you'll find it hard to read text on screen.

Whichever method you use, you'll need a second cable to carry sound. VGA can't carry a sound signal, and while HDMI supports sound, DVI does not. The cable that you use will depend on your TV. Most TVs

will have a 3.5mm jack plug audio input next to the VGA video input and twin phono inputs next to the HDMI video input. The TV will choose which audio input to use depending on which video input is currently selected. Your laptop has a 3.5mm jack plug output, so you'll need either a 3.5mm-to-3.5mm cable or a 3.5mm-to-twin phono cable, depending on which audio input you are going to use. Both cables are available from shops such as www.maplin.co.uk.

Connecting your laptop in this way will work fine for playing back normal DVDs or downloaded video, but unfortunately it won't work for playing back HD DVDs. This is because HD DVDs are protected with high-bandwidth digital content protection (HDCP). This is meant to prevent you copying HD DVDs by ensuring that high-definition content will play only on HDCP-compliant screens through an HDCP-compliant digital video and audio connection, which your laptop doesn't have. That said, with Warner Brothers' announcement that it isn't supporting HD DVD any more (see *News* on page 18), you might be better off waiting a few months to see what happens.

Because of the problems with HDCP, it's probably more hassle than it's worth to use a laptop to play back high-definition content on a separate screen. We would recommend buying a standalone HD DVD player instead, such as Toshiba's HD-E1, which is currently £200 including VAT from www.pcwb.com.



▲ Toshiba's HD-E1 is a cheap and hassle-free way to enjoy high-definition video

Pushing the envelope

Q I have read many of your reviews of printers, both laser and inkjet, but I cannot remember seeing one in which you were satisfied with the printer's ability to print addresses on envelopes. Do you know of a printer that can print envelopes without jamming?

Bryan Mitchell

A Almost all inkjets can print on envelopes, and have markings in their paper tray to show you where to put the envelopes. Laser printers often work in a different way, with an envelope feed slot. The mistake that many people make when printing on envelopes is not to set the printer to envelope mode in the driver. If the printer is expecting a normal thickness of paper and is then fed something thicker, like an envelope, it may jam. The printer driver's settings page will have several presets for different types of paper, so you should make sure you set the printer to envelope mode.

Even when set up correctly, many printers still mangle envelopes in the feed mechanism. The best printer we've seen for printing envelopes is HP's Color LaserJet 3600 (Best Buy, *Labs*, *Shopper* 240). It has a tray rather than a slot for envelopes, and makes a far better job of printing on envelopes than other lasers.



▲ HP's Color LaserJet 3600 is a fantastic printer that makes it easy to print on envelopes

It's also fast with good overall print quality, and it is cheap to run. You can buy it for £295 including VAT from www.printerland.co.uk.

Confused about Core 2 Duo

Q I'm interested in buying a new desktop computer. I have a shortlist of components I would like, but can't quite decide which PC to get. Ideally, I would like a fast Core 2 Duo processor, at least 2GB of RAM, a hard disk with plenty of storage, a graphics card with at least 256MB of memory, USB2 ports at the front as well as the rear, Windows Vista Home Premium and a good-sized monitor. The computer would be used for home office tasks and also editing home movies. I would prefer a PC to a Mac.

I was very interested in your £600 PCs Labs test in *Shopper* 240. I liked the sound of RL Supplies' Modula 4300OC, which was so fast in 2D Windows applications, but I was put off by the thought that the overclocked processor might be noisy and overheat.

Ron Lewis

A Intel's Core 2 Duo processors are remarkably power-efficient, so they not only use less power than previous processors such as the Pentium 4, they also produce less heat. The fact that they produce less heat also makes them suitable for overclocking, as you don't necessarily need huge processor coolers to make an overclocked Core 2 Duo stable.

RL Supplies' Modula 4300OC takes advantage of its Core 2 Duo E4500's overclockable nature by running its processor at 3GHz instead of 2.2GHz, giving it a massive performance boost in Windows applications. The PC didn't overheat, as it was stable in all our intensive 2D and 3D benchmarks. RL Supplies fitted a third-party heatsink, which was larger than Intel's reference heatsink and



▲ The Modula 4300OC's overclocked processor gives huge performance without affecting stability

slightly louder, but the difference in noise became noticeable only once we had removed the side of the case. This is a cleverly designed and fast PC, which is why it won our Best Buy award.

Home photo printing

Q I would like your advice on printers. I want to spend no more than £150 on a printer or MFP that will produce excellent photo prints and not use too much ink. I was thinking about a Canon, HP or possibly an Epson model. Which is the best photo printer to buy?

David Bell

A The best inkjet for photo prints that we've seen is Epson's Stylus Photo R360, reviewed in this month's *What's New* on page 36. It has a large screen for photo previews and memory card slots for all popular memory card formats, and it produces beautiful, professional-looking photos. Unfortunately, this quality comes at a price.

Estimating inkjet printers' cost per photo is difficult, because there is no ISO standard for photo prints. Based on the cost of printing colour A4 documents and the price of Epson's replacement photo paper, we estimate that the R360 will cost 27p per photo. This is reasonable for the occasional snap, but it will mount up if you're printing entire albums. To print lots of photos, we'd suggest an online photo-printing service such as PhotoBox (www.photobox.co.uk), which charges just 10p a print.



▲ Epson's Stylus Photo R360 produces excellent but expensive photo prints

Upgrading a base unit

Q I have a system I bought as a package from Evesham some years ago. The monitor and printer work fine, but I think the graphics card may be broken and I'm tempted to upgrade the base unit with something more up to date. The PC will need to play and write DVDs, have a floppy disk, let me watch TV and allow me to transfer video from old VHS tapes and an analogue camcorder to DVD. I also may want to play some games. I've seen a couple of adverts for PCs in *Shopper*, but I could do with some advice as to which processor and accessories I'll need.

Jim Wolfe

A Unfortunately, most of the PCs we review in *Shopper* are complete systems rather than base units, and nothing we've reviewed recently matches your criteria. However, we can give you some advice about what to look for in a base unit.

You'll be working with video a fair bit, so we'd definitely recommend a dual-core processor. Video encoding is one of the few applications that's optimised for two cores. Intel's processor range contains a number of fast and good-value processors, such as the budget Pentium Dual Core E2180. We'd also get at least 1GB of system memory, and your PC will need a DVD writer. Video files are large, so you should look for a 250GB hard disk. If you want to play modern games, we'd go for a system with at least an Nvidia GeForce 8600GTS graphics card.

To watch TV, you'll need a simple TV card. If you live in an area with good digital TV reception then you

can get a digital-only card, but if you also need analogue TV reception get an analogue/digital hybrid. If your base unit doesn't come with a TV card, you can fit one yourself. So you don't have to open up your PC, we'd recommend buying an external USB TV card, such as Terratec's Cinergy DT USB. It has two digital tuners and costs £60 including VAT from www.pixmania.co.uk.

The easiest way to record from an analogue source such as a VHS video or an analogue camcorder is to use Terratec's Grabster AV400. This plugs into a USB port and lets you capture video from composite or S-video sources. It even comes with Ulead's DVD Moviefactory 5, which helps you create your own DVDs. It's £77 including VAT from www.dabs.com. **CS**



▲ You'll need appropriate accessories to watch TV and capture video to your PC